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ABSTRACT

A descriptive study was conducted to identify the problems met by university department chairs and describe the most common methods for dealing with them. The data were gathered by both qualitative and quantitative methods using a national survey of 808 department chairs (with a 70.2% response rate) as well as a series of semi-structured open-ended interviews. The theoretical framework for the study used notions of organizational socialization, focusing on the third stage of "learning the ropes" which is identified as the adaptation phase. Results of the study indicated that three main surprises challenge most chairs, in the areas of dealing with people, coping with the bureaucracy of the university, and counteracting the negative effect which being department chair has on research productivity. Results also indicated that department chairs used a variety of responses or "sense making processes" to adjust to the surprises. In general, chairs accepted the volume of paperwork required in the position, without effort to change it. Chairs used a variety of strategies to respond to the demands of working with and being available to other people and to respond to the need to find time for their own research. Included are three figures, an appendix containing descriptions of the interview subjects, and 17 references. (JB)

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The Problem Solving Role of the University Department Chair

by

Rita G. Seedorf

Presented at the Annual Meeting
of the American Educational Research Association
San Francisco, California
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which a newcomer learns and is taught "the ropes" (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Organizational socialization has been divided into three stages: the anticipatory, the encounter, and the adaptation phases (Merton, 1957; Wanous, 1977; Van Maanen, 1976).

Anticipatory socialization occurs when recruits are still outsiders to the profession. It is during this phase that the mental picture of the new position is formed in the mind of the transitioner (Merton, 1957). Internships and training programs for professionals occur during this stage of the transition.

The encounter phase of organizational socialization follows the anticipatory stage and is the time during which the actual transition takes place. Louis (1980) identified some key features of the newcomer experience and presented a model for understanding the processes of newcomer coping or sense-making which take place during the encounter stage. According to her model, *changes*, *contrasts*, and *surprises* constitute major features of the entry experience. *Changes* are the predictable aspects of the transition such as the address of the new office, the names of new colleagues, and official university policy. Changes can be known ahead of time. *Contrasts* and *surprises*, however, are based on the expectations which newcomers bring to the role and cannot be identified in advance. Contrasts occur when a transitioner becomes aware of a difference between his or her old and new positions. Contrasts are unique to each person because each comes to the new position with a different set of experiences and preferences.

The position of University department chair is pivotal in higher education in the United States. A chair is the critical connection which provides leadership, establishes climate, builds curriculum, and formulates and implements goals for the faculty and for the department (McLaughlin, Montgomery, & Malpass, 1975; Creswell, 1990). Chairs are essential to the success of an academic institution. They are the necessary link between the managerial and technical (academic) core of the university (Bare, 1986).

University department chairs face many challenges during their tenure in the position. Trained as a academicians and acting simultaneously as professors and administrators, chairs deal with many of the challenges met by professionally trained managers. The results of filling this combined role are role conflict and frustration for chairs. (Gamble, 1988; Tucker, 1984; Milstein, 1990).

This descriptive study was designed to identify the problems met by university department chairs and describe the most common methods for dealing with them. Data for this descriptive study were gathered by both qualitative and quantitative methods. A national survey was conducted as well as a series of semi-structured open ended interviews.

Theoretical Framework

This study of the department chair was informed by theories from the field of organizational socialization which studies the process by which an individual comes to appreciate the values, abilities, behavior, and knowledge essential for assuming an organizational role. To put it more simply, it is the process by

Surprises are also unique to the individual. A surprise occurs when the transitioner has created a mental picture of the new position and finds that it does not conform with the reality of the situation. Surprises are discrepant events which cause the transitioner to pay conscious attention to events which are otherwise handled in non-conscious ways. These events trigger a need for explanation and a sense-making or problem solving process leading to adaptation, the third phase of occupational socialization.

This study focuses on the adaptation stage which is the period during which the transitioner moves from newcomer to insider. Also referred to as role management (Feldman, 1976) adaptation is considered more of a state than a stage in many adaptation models (Lewis, 1980). In order to effectively make a transition to a new role, a process of "sense-making" takes place as illustrated in Figure 1. As a result of the sense-making process chairs form attitudes about the various surprises of the role and accommodate to them.

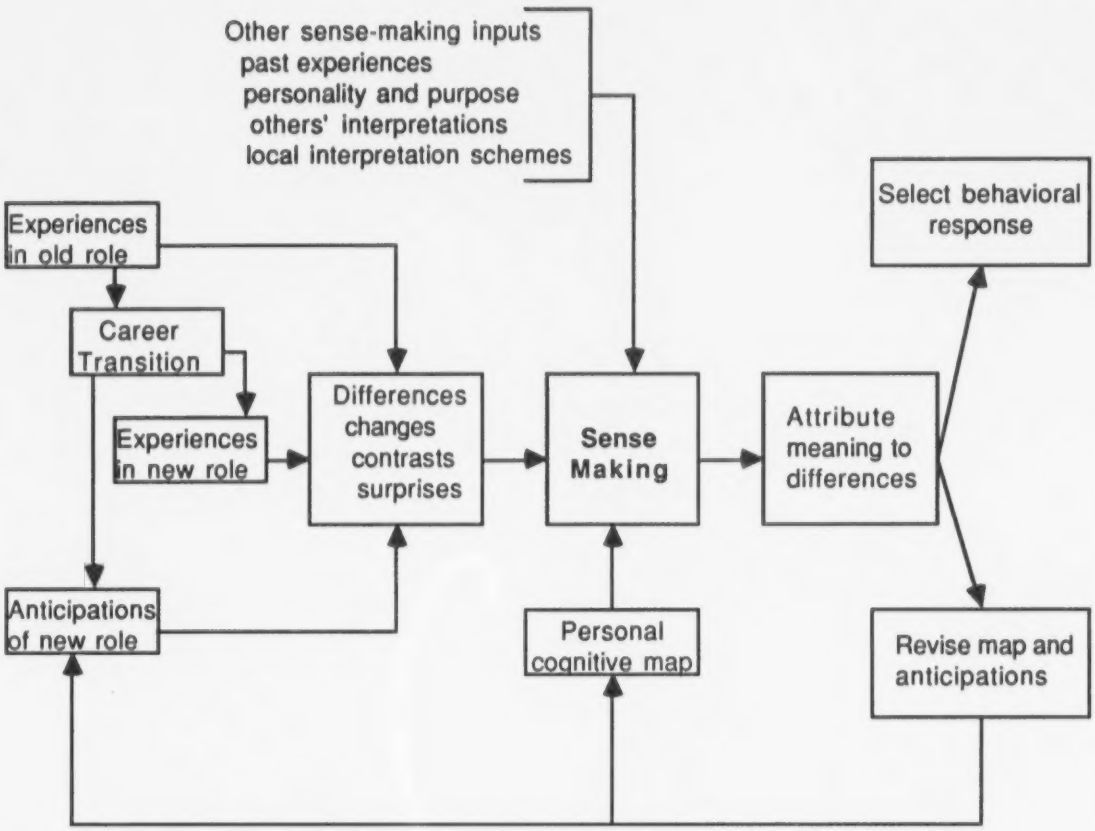

Figure 1 Coping with Career transitions: The Sense Making Process. From "Career Transitions: Varieties and Commonalities" by M.R. Louis, 1980, Academy of Management Review, 5, 2, p. 337.

Methods

In order to gain the representativeness provided by a large sample and the rich description provided by qualitative research, two methods of obtaining descriptive data were utilized in this study. A questionnaire was distributed in order to obtain data on a large number of subjects and interviews were conducted in order to provide thick description of the role of department chair.

The quantitative study consisted of a survey of 808 department chairs from 101 universities categorized by the Carnegie council as

Research I and II and Doctorate granting I and II. The questionnaire, which 70.2% of surveyed chairs returned, was sent to a stratified sample of academic disciplines, representing all eight classifications as established by Biglan (1973) who determined that disciplines vary considerably from one another.

The data from the returned questionnaires were entered into an electronic spreadsheet. Quantitative data from the survey were analyzed by calculating percentages and measures of central tendency and variability. The means and ranges were calculated on the data which served to place perspective on the chairs' departmental context. Responses in prose form were printed verbatim. These responses were sorted with like categories and the constant-comparative method was used to sort and resort the data until clear categories emerged.

The qualitative portion of the study consisted of a field study consisting of a series of semi-structured open-ended interviews with chairs. Subjects for this field study were located in one research university categorized as Research II by the Carnegie Counsel. In order for the study to provide "slices of data" or different views and vantage points from which to understand a category and develop its properties (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), subjects for the field study were chosen from departments representing all eight of the Biglan categories. Further sampling decisions were made in order to insure that chairs from varying sizes of departments and lengths of tenure in office were included. Descriptions of the subjects of the field study are included in the appendix of this paper. Interviews continued until the point of

saturation was reached with saturation being defined as the point at which no new information is being generated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The first portion of the field interview consisted of demographic data. The second portion of the interview consisted of a series of questions designed to prompt chairs to remember and discuss their transition experiences. In order to provide additional perspective, a semi-structured, informal interview was conducted with a dean who had progressed to his current position by moving from professor to department chair to acting dean.

The interviews generated anecdotes regarding the surprises faced by chairs. These anecdotes emerged in all parts of the interview and were not limited to answers to the specific questions on surprises. Anecdotes regarding the methods of coping or making sense of the transition emerged throughout the text of all interviews, although no specific question was directed to that topic.

Field notes and verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were coded and analyzed in order to identify consistent factors and emerging categories. Responses to like questions were grouped and contrasting opinions were included and reanalysis continued until all data were categorized. The data from the field study were analyzed according to the constant comparative method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

Results and Conclusions

The results of the study indicate that three main surprises challenge the department chair. They are dealing with people, coping

with the bureaucracy of the university, and counteracting the negative effect which being department chair has on their research productivity.

When faculty members became department chairs they were surprised by the nature and quantity of time which was spent dealing with people. As professors, they had exercised a great deal of autonomy in deciding how much time was spent with others and with which people they would interact. As department chairs they found that they had to deal with staff members and with faculty members from a different perspective. They were surprised by the amount of time that people wished to spend just talking with them and found that they had become public figures and had less control of their time.

A second challenge which involved dealing with people was the supervision of classified staff. Chairs in the field study supervised office staffs varying in size from one secretary to a staff of 13. Because chairs' duties are so diversified, they cannot be handled without the help of an office staff. Professors who came directly to the chair without previous administrative experience found that they had to become accustomed to supervising classified workers. New department chairpersons were also surprised at the degree to which they depended on their staff. When staff members were effective, chairs didn't hesitate to give them credit and acknowledge their dependence upon them.

Academics turned department chair were surprised by two aspects of the bureaucratic organization of the university, the

pressures of being a boundary role representative and the paperwork demands made upon them by the structure of the research university. The position of boundary role representative, while crucial to the functioning of an organization, is a difficult one to fulfill. Messages from one part of the organization need translating if they are to be effective in other parts (Katz & Kahn, 1966). The problem of communication falls at the boundaries of the subsystem and the resolution of the problem falls to the person who fills the boundary role, in this case the department chair. In the university, these pressures came from the members of the academic department to which he or she belonged and from the dean's office which represented the administration. One chair found it extremely stressful "to be a faculty member on the one hand and an administrator on the other." Another discovered that:

> A chair has to be a two-faced person. He or she must represent the department to the upper administration and the upper administration to the department. Sometimes one has to be the bearer of bad news in both directions. After a while, you wear out your welcome both ways and displease both sides.

Another aspect of the bureaucracy which surprises chairs is the amount of paperwork to which they are required to respond. They find no reward in the paperwork. Said one chair: "I don't get kicks out of filling out forms in a timely fashion." Another found that the most salient change which occurred when he became chair was that he had to sign "a lot more documents." Chairs in the field study were not alone in decrying the amount of paperwork involved in the job of department chair. Respondents from the national survey were asked

to respond to the question, "When do you feel dissatisfied with your job?" Paperwork was the largest single dissatisfier identified. Chairs were dissatisfied when they were overloaded with paperwork, when the paperwork piled up, and when they had to fill out forms and paperwork that are never read. They referred to it as long and involved, excessive, vacuous, imposed from on high, redundant, endless, unnecessary, mundane, overwhelming, purposeless, meaningless, and pointless.

The third problem area came from the effect which administrative duties had on the research programs of the chairs. "This job is a time sink," and "administration expands to fill the time available" were comments regarding the third surprise which chairs encounter when taking over the role. Meetings, paperwork, and the nature of administrative work took up much more time than they anticipated.

Chairs beginning their first term of office assumed that a reduced teaching load would allow them ample time to continue with their research. Some began their term of office intending to take off enough time to continue their research activities. One chair began with a firm commitment to leave her office two afternoons a week in order to write. She found that it became less possible over time and by the third year of her appointment as chair, that plan was completely abandoned.

Another chair found that he had to abandon research time during the work day and do his work on his own time. After two years of that arrangement, he could no longer maintain the pace. "I'm tired

after an eight hour day of the brevity, fragmentation, and variety of administrative work."

This surprise was particularly difficult for chairs in research universities to resolve because they feel pressure from both the university and their academic disciplines to continue researching during their terms as chair.

Aside from this pressure, some chairs were forced to maintain their research programs by the nature of their disciplines. One chair in the field study stated:

> One of the real real problems, particularly in the sciences and engineering where research is a major component of a faculty position, is that if you become a department chair for any length of time at all...you are dead. You can never go back to research again. You won't be able to get funding, you'll be out of touch with things and so what are you going to do? Your career is dead.

Another chair who intended to return to faculty also used the death analogy when he explained that he had to protect himself for the future. "If I didn't publish I would be dead personally and professionally." A third chair who left his position as interim chair to become chair at another institution also felt compelled to keep up his research.

> I don't want to be a department chair for the rest of my life. I want to return to the academic side of things after I've done my administrative tour of duty. It's almost essential that one stay continually active in research lest one falls behind....I'm hedging my bets.

The administration-research dilemma was true for all chairs who attempted to maintain their programs of research. They were compelled to find time to research in order to save their place in the academic world. They were surprised at the toll that administration took on their research programs and this surprise continued as they repeatedly made adaptations in order to pursue their programs so that they would be viable department members when they return to faculty.

In summary, the surprises of faculty members who become department chairs fell into three categories. New chairs were surprised by relationships with people, by their dealings with the university bureaucracy, particularly the amount of paperwork and the discomfort caused by sitting on the boundary between faculty and administration. They were also surprised by the effect that the role of chair had on their research productivity

The process of sense-making is a response to the need for explanation triggered by the surprise. The process includes recognizing the surprise and making sense of the new situation. The difference between what is expected and what is encountered, creates a quasi-need for equilibrium (Lewin, 1951). In order to eliminate this condition of disequilibrium, the transitioner will engage in *sense-making*. When coming across a surprise, the newcomer will attempt to make sense of it by making use of others' interpretations, local interpretation schemes, and his or her own predispositions, purposes, and past experiences (Louis, 1980).

In the process of sense-making, the transitioner creates a new cognitive map which makes sense of the discrepant event. From the

new cognitive map, decisions are made which work or do not work. If the discrepant event becomes predictable, the new cognitive map is used, if not, it is revised once again and the "sense-making" process is repeated.

Through the process of sense-making chairpersons arrive at solutions which help them cope with the surprises which they encounter in their new role. They find ways to deal with people, to cope with the demands of the bureaucracy, and to manage their program of research.

When faced with the surprises of the role, university department chairs engage in problem solving and choose one of three ways to deal with the situations. They either accept the situation as it is, decide to act on it alone, or act on it in concert with others. Figure 2 illustrates the transition process of the department chair, including the adaptation mechanisms used by chairpersons.

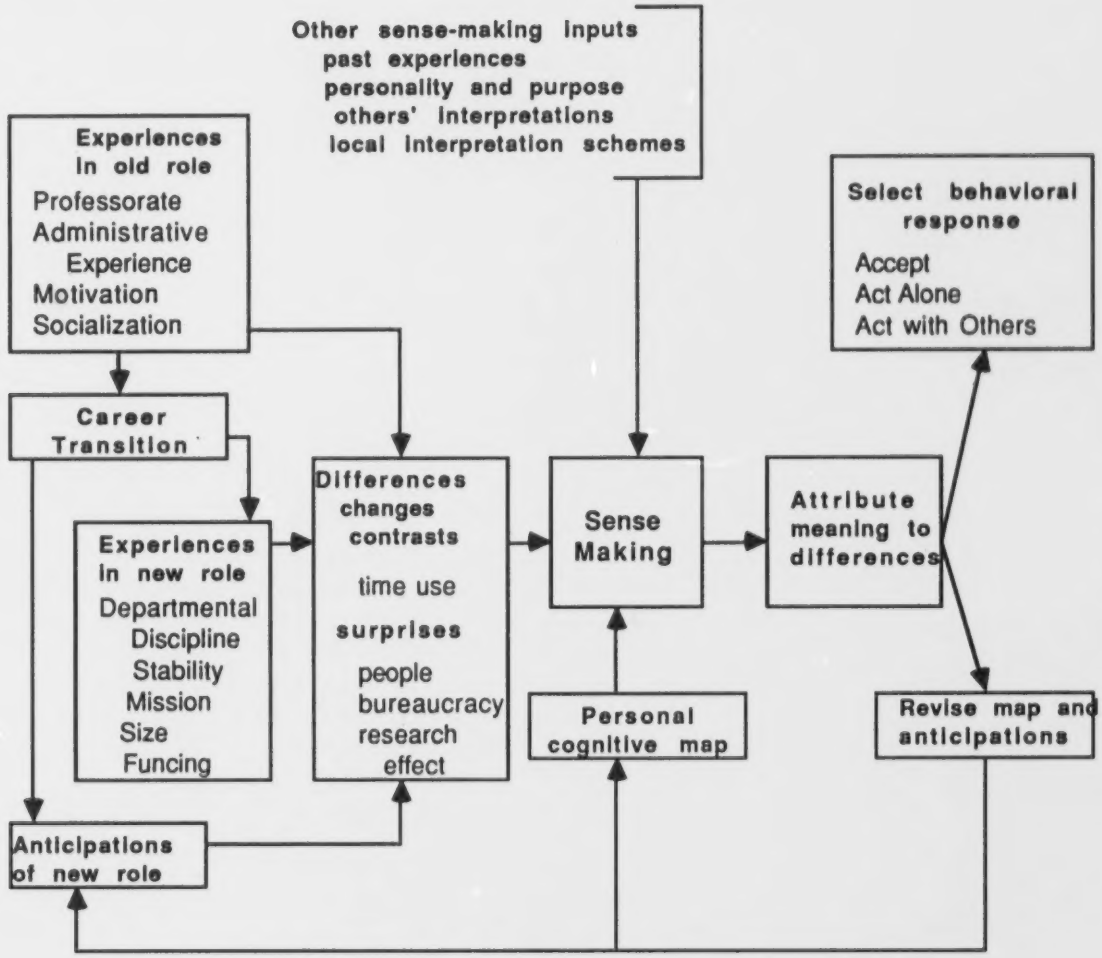

Figure 2. The Sense Making Process of the Department Chair (As adapted from "Career Transitions: Varieties and Commonalities" by M.R. Louis, 1980, *Academy of Management Review 5*, 2, p. 337.)

When chairs perceive that they can do nothing about changing a situation, they accept it. Chairs choose to accept and live with some of their surprises. Examples of situations which chairs accept are staff problems, the discomfort of being trapped between faculty and administration and the paperwork involved in the position. Staff problems often continue to plague chairs until they are able to replace the staff member. Another situation which some chairs

accept is the discomfort of sitting on the boundary between faculty and administration. The tension continues unless the chair has made the decision to become an administrator. As long as the chair plans to return to faculty, the problem continues. If, however, the chair decides to become an administrator, many of the frustrations of the boundary role representative position are eliminated.

The position of the boundary role representative requires that the chair represent faculty to administration and administration to faculty and communicate between the two. It causes the process of sense-making to continue. There is constant problem solving involved and the chair continually seeks to resolve this dilemma. As long as a chair is identified with the faculty, he or she accepts the ambiguity in the position.

Chairs also learned to accept the paperwork generated by the bureaucracy of the research university. They spent long hours trying to keep up and they discussed the problem but there is very little that they felt they could do to stem the paper flow from the upper levels of the university. They regarded it as an inescapable part of the job. Chairs accepted the surprises caused by the bureaucracy because they believed either that they could not change them or that changing the status quo would be an enormous and unrewarding task. When a staff, paperwork, or bureaucratic hassle was too large chairs accepted the situation as it was. They made no attempt to change it, although it resulted in much discussion of the topic.

Chairs resolved some of the surprises of the position by making decisions and acting upon them alone. Example situations from the field study included taking action to remove an incompetent staff

person, changing staff before taking over the office, restructuring time, physical space, or activities to facilitate research activities, and abandoning the research program.

One example is the chair who dedicated his first seven months in office to removing an incompetent secretary. He spent considerable time preparing a well-documented case to present to the personnel department and when she left his blood pressure dropped 10 points.

Another chair was able to act on his staff problems before he took over the office of chair. He made the removal of the entire office staff a condition of his becoming head of the department. He wanted to begin with a new group of people because the previous staff was disorganized and on a different "time wave." He hired a new staff which he described as productive, efficient at what they did, and who "wanted to be there."

Some chairs found ways to structure their time to cope with the constant frustration of the fragmentation of administrative work. Chairs made two types of adaptations to this dilemma. They closed their doors or they left the premises. Some chairs found that the best solution was to find another office, removed from the administrative area, where they could escape most of the interruptions and yet be on campus when needed. "So I always have a second place removed from the department and this allows me to essentially hide out. The department people know where I am and can contact me. It's an advantage."

Removing themselves from the university is another solution which chairs employed. Some decided upon a specific time to leave

the office each day to work at a home office. One chair who left the office at 2:00 p.m. each day found that he had a calendar full of exceptions, but whenever he could he got away and did conscious work, "even if it was one page.

Chairs found that while some actions can be taken independently, others were more easily or best performed by acting in concert with others. Some department chairs solved research problems by working with others and some solved paperwork problems with group action. Chairs who were able to work with their staffs trained them to take over some of the paperwork duties.

As some chairs found that they were able to work with their staff to accomplish department goals, some also were able to maintain their research by working in concert with a group of researchers or graduate students. One chair stated that he continued his research "only in the sense that I have graduate students, post doctoral research assistants. They research. I do little 'hands on' research except proposal writing and manuscript preparation." Another chair who has seen a decline in his productivity joined a research group because he realized that "writing will require more collaboration that it did in the past. I will be accountable to produce as well."

Chairs acted in concert with others when it was necessary to do so. They worked cooperatively with staff to eliminate the amount of time they spent on bureaucratic paperwork and some facilitated their research by joining with colleagues or graduate students.

When faculty members became chairs, they found that they were forced to deal with the unexpected aspects of the position. They

found ways to accommodate to the people problems, the bureaucratic demands, and the administration-research dilemma. They either accepted the situation, acted upon it alone, or acted upon it in concert with others as illustrated in Figure 3.

Chairs found some situations with which they learned to live. In some instances, the problem lasted the entire term of office and sometimes changes were made which enabled the chairs to act. Examples of surprises which chairs learned to accept were staff problems which were impossible or too time consuming to change, the discomfort of sitting on the fence between administration and faculty, and the paperwork which is part of that position.

Sometimes chairs made decisions and acted alone to resolve the dissonance caused by the surprise. Examples of these solitary actions are chairs who removed and replaced difficult staff members, and chairs who structured their time and location to allow their research programs to continue. Some chairs acted to resolve the administration-research dilemma by abandoning their research. Chairs also resolved surprises by working in concert with others. Chairs in the field study acted in this manner to gain assistance from the staff and to complete research projects.

The literature of organizational socialization provides a framework for looking at transitions and also suggests that orientation programs which provide a realistic, rather than idealistic, picture of the institution and the job result in positive results for both the organization and the individual (Wanous, 1977). The knowledge of the chief areas which surprise chairs and the

typical solutions which chairs use to solve the dilemmas inherent in the position may be helpful to those who are serving as chairs or considering taking the position. The problems caused by dealing with people, by the bureaucracy of the research university, and the effect that administrative duties have on the research careers of chairs should be known by those who are considering taking the position.

The knowledge of strategies used by chairs may be of interest to those who are serving in the position. As one interviewed chair said: "I had to learn what I could safely ignore." Chairs discover that some problems can be solved while others must be accepted as an inherent part of the position.

	ACCEPT	SOLVE ALONE	SOLVE WITH OTHERS
People Problems	learn to live with personnel problems	remove personnel	
Bureaucracy			
Paperwork	learn to deal with it		pass on to office staff
Boundary Role	accept the discomfort or become an administrator		
Effect on Research			
		abandon research work on weekends find other office space in department or leave the premises	conduct research with colleagues or graduate students

Figure 3: Problem Solving Strategies of Chairs

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Appendix

DESCRIPTION OF FIELD STUDY SUBJECTS

In order to insure confidentiality to the subjects of this study, the male pronoun is used in all chair descriptions.

Chair A, a full professor, had been chair of a "soft applied life" discipline for 8 months at the time of the interview. He took office at a time when the department was suffering from what they claimed to be a lack of leadership.

The previous chair stepped down before his term of office was complete and the present chair was asked to serve by the faculty through the dean. The chair was tenured at the time of taking over the position and had just returned from sabbatical. He accepted because he was ready for something new. He had served previously as chair in another institution, had administered a large grant, and was a specialist in a leadership field.

Chair B was the head of a department in a "hard applied non-life" discipline who had served in that position for nine years. When he was hired, the department had been searching for a chair for two years. He experienced a formal interview with the faculty and the dean before taking the position. He came in from a neighboring institution charged with the task of starting a viable graduate program in the department. He had no previous formal

administrative experience. Chair B was brought into the institution with tenure and the rank of full professor. He accepted the position in order to build the department "the right way" and also because it meant a considerable raise in salary.

Chair C, an associate professor, became chair of a department categorized as "soft pure life" when the previous chair was not asked to serve again at the conclusion of his term. There was no one else in the department who was eligible and acceptable to both the faculty and the dean so he took the position by default. He was charged with paying attention to the day to day details in the department which was "disorganized" when he took over the position. He had no previous formal administrative experience and had served for one and one year and eight months at the time of the interview.

Chair D was hired from outside of the institution to take over as chair of a "soft pure non-life" department. He was brought in with the rank of full professor with tenure and given the charge of completing the merger of two departments into an integrated whole. A previous search had not produced a candidate so an interim chair had been appointed to the position for the previous year. Chair D had been chair for 9 months at the time of the interview. He was an experienced administrator having served as a department chair, assistant and associate dean before taking the position. He had undergone a formal interview with both the dean and the faculty of the department and accepted the position because he wanted to to assume a position which would put him in a line, rather than a staff

position in the hierarchy and because he and his family wanted to locate in the part of the country and type of town in which the university was located.

Chair E was his ninth month serving as interim chair of a department classified as "soft applied non-life." He served because the dean told him he would. There was no formal interview. He was a tenured full-professor at the time of assuming his role. The department was stable and well managed when he took office. There were faculty vacancies to fill and the department was "growing by leaps and bounds" at the time of the interview. Although he had never performed as chair, he had performed most of the duties at one time or another in his role as professor.

Chair F was in his fifth year as chair of a department in the "hard pure life" category at the time of the interview. He was a full professor with tenure when the previous chair was transferred to another part of the state and he was asked to take over. He agreed because he was told that the department would get a badly-needed position if he took over as chair. He had no formal interview but was asked to serve by the faculty through the dean. The department was stable when he took over the helm. Prior to becoming chair, he had no real administrative experience.

Chair G, a tenured full professor, had served as chair of a "soft applied life" department for 3 years and 9 months at the time of his interview. He came to the position from that of associate dean in

the same college. A new department had formed and, during its first year of operation, had been administered by an interim chair who was not interested in continuing in office. He had been chair of the search committee which failed to fill the position when he was asked to apply for the position himself. He accepted because it was an opportunity to work with colleagues to make a productive unit. At the time he took over the department, it was in flux. Because it had only been formed a year before, it had not yet gelled and had no identity.

Chair H, a tenured associate professor, had been in office for two years and seven months at the time of the interview. He took over the "soft pure non-life" department when the previous chair decided not to serve another term. He and another person had been recommended to the dean by the faculty. The other candidate declined to be chair. Chair H had a series of interviews with the dean during which he negotiated the conditions of taking the position. He accepted the position because he was the only one qualified and willing to do it in the department. At the time that he took over the department, morale among the department members was low because the department had been losing full-time positions. He had no administrative experience prior to becoming chair but had performed a role as a section head without budget.

Chair I had been chair of a department classified as "hard pure life" for over 15 years. He was a full professor with tenure when the former chair resigned and he was persuaded to take the position

on a two year temporary basis. He agreed to take the position at the urging of faculty. There was no formal interview for the position. At the time that he took over the department, it had an excellent reputation and was just beginning to develop a graduate program. He had no administrative experience at that time.

Chair J was a tenured full professor who had headed a "hard pure non-life" department for five years and eight months at the time of the interview. The opening occurred because his predecessor was tired of being chair and returned to faculty. He became chair when the faculty talked to him and then discussed it with the dean. There was no formal interview process. He agreed to take the position because he saw a chance to lead the department in some directions he thought it should go. Prior to becoming chair, he had served as assistant dean.

Chair K was serving in his second year as interim chair of a "hard applied life" department. He was a tenured full professor when asked to serve as interim. The previous chair had resigned with two weeks notice to take a position at another university. Chair K was not interviewed for the position but asked to serve by both the dean and the faculty. He accepted the call out of sense of obligation. There were several faculty vacancies which needed to be filled and he didn't feel he could ignore the responsibility. At the time of the interview, the Chair K had just accepted a position as permanent chair at another university.